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ABSTRACT

In 1965, Richard Young and Alton Becker announced the task of founding a "modern theory of rhetoric," building on the insights of tagmemic linguist, Kenneth Pike. Five years later, their collaboration with Pike resulted in a textbook, "Rhetoric: Discovery and Change," whose broad purpose was to restore invention to its proper place at the heart of practical rhetoric and to reconceive of writing as a problem-solving, discovery process. Despite these accomplishments, the current state of tagmemics in composition studies is a sad one; most consider it a theory of the past. However, Kenneth Pike's earliest and most original insights were and are paradigmatically so far advanced over extant 20th-century notions of what both linguistics and rhetoric should be that only a few were even dimly able to realize its potential and even they failed to take advantage of its most original and potent insights. Pike was the first among linguists and rhetoricians in the 20th century to posit reality as a multi-dimensional entity that, while existing independent of the observer, is nevertheless in some sense constructed by an individual observer through discourse--both public and private. Because, the tagmemcist believes, humankind's vision is always partial and finite, and because language itself is always approximate, never fully apprehending the reality it seeks to name, a multiperspectival rhetorical theory and practice is necessary to catalogue and address human experience. (An appended chart lists advantages of tagmemic theory.) (TB)

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The Reports of Its Death Are Greatly Exaggerated: Tagmemics and the Politics of Indifference

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In 1965, Richard Young and Alton Becker announced the task of founding a "modern theory of rhetoric," building upon the insights of tagmemic linguist, Kenneth Pike, and seeking to free rhetoric from a moribund current-traditional model that seemed to them to emphasize a product-oriented pedagogy focused primarily on style and arrangement.[1] Five years later, their collaboration with Pike resulted in an 1970 textbook, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, whose broad purpose was to restore invention to its proper place at the heart of practical rhetoric, influenced in large measure by the work of psychologist Carl Rogers, and to reconceive writing as a problem-solving, discovery process. Paradoxically, this event effectively ended the possibility of core tagmemic theory, as it has continued to develop outside or parallel to its use within the composition profession, having any real impact on the course of composition practice or rhetorical theory.

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[1] *Harvard Educational Review*, 35 (1965), 450-68.

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From one point of view, it would seem absurd to conclude anything other than that Young, Becker, and Pike were successful, and have had a continuing and formidable influence on the profession at large.[2] However, this apparent evidence of influence rings hollow when one considers the actual status of tagmemic theory in compositionist circles mirrored in the following list of three disturbing facts:

(1) There is no succession of textbooks or textbook writers since *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, that have continued to define and refine a pedagogy based primarily upon tagmemic conceptualizations of communication.

(2) There is no identifiable, ongoing tagmemics-related research program associated with any major figures in composition studies after 1979.

(3) There is no tagmemic reader available that makes readily accessible the key statements and ongoing research of working tagmemicists.

Thus what Phillips, et al.'s survey really tells us is that while tagmemics—especially in its filtered incarnation in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*—is often thematically part of the obligatory invention sections of contemporary textbooks and continues to be referenced in historical surveys of the development of discipline of rhetoric and composition, the profession at large actually identifies tagmemics almost entirely with certain dated notions of process or invention, and has no clue of what unique perspective

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[2]In their December 1993 article, "CCC: Chronicling a Discipline's Genesis," Philips, Greenberg, and Gibson [CCC, 44 (Dec. 1993), 443-65.] document the frequency of citation these three enjoyed over three decades Their article establishes, for instance that between 1950-64, the most frequently cited authors in the pages of CCC were C. C. Fries (13) and Kenneth L. Pike (11). Between 1965-79, the most frequently cited authors were Francis Christensen (68), Kenneth Burke (54), followed directly by Richard Young (54), Alton Becker (34), and Kenneth L. Pike (33). Even in the period between 1980-93, an era dominated by references to Linda Flower (139) and John Hayes (107), Young (37), Becker (20), and Pike (19) were still cited frequently.

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or effective practice tagmemics might bring to contemporary debates about our conference theme, "Literacies, Technologies, Responsibilities."

There is a reason for this status, a status with which has as much to do with tagmemics' friends as its enemies. Nothing illustrates this better than Erika Lindemann's just published article in *College English*, which epitomizes the problems tagmemic theory has had in gaining a meaningful presence in composition studies.[3] While paying homage to the generational power of the tagmemic perspectives of particle, wave, and field that serve her in her delineation of three kinds of approaches to writing and the use of literature, Lindemann thereby unwittingly marginalizes tagmemics, reducing it to its familiar status as merely a template with which codifiy existing data. In this, Lindemann repeats a tactical mistake that those most publicly associated with tagmemics originated in the then emerging discipline of rhetoric and composition in the 1970s and early 1980s. Like Lindemann in the present, they so thoroughly associated tagmemics in the minds of rank and file compositionists with one strand of invention—particularly the fascination with the nine-celled discovery matrix—and with certain conceptions of "writing as process" that most observers rightly conclude that tagmemics is clearly a theory with a past, but not a future.

But I beg to differ. *Tagmemic rhetoric in today's marketplace of ideas may be anachronistic, but so has it ever been,* as Kenneth Pike's earliest and most original insights were and are paradigmatically so far advanced over extant 20th-century notions of what both linguistics and rhetoric should be, no one, save Young and Becker and here and there a few promising graduate students, were equipped even dimly to recognize its potential, and even they

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[3] "Three Views of English 101," *College English* 57 (March 1995), 287-302.

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a system, and/or as a system within a particular universe of discourse and cultural context. That is to say, a tagmeme might be an utterance, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter in a book, a genre, an individual speaker, writer, or reader, a tradition or practice—any language or behavioral data that has distinguishable functions and effects in a particular language situation.

From Pike's point of view, the linguist's or rhetorician's task inevitably involves searching for and locating the appropriate "tagmeme" with which to begin fruitful entry and inquiry into a particular language issue or problem. The goal of such inquiry is movement from an etic or outsider view of discourse and meaning to an increasingly emic or "native" view. Here all the mysteries of difference and sameness may be explored and delineated. A number of theoretical insights for the field of rhetoric may thus be derived from Pike's original inquiry and formulation of the tagmeme. Among them is the tagmemic axiom that language users view the world in repeatable units but may choose to focus upon them as particles (discrete bits), waves (merging of units and overlapping borders that change over time), or fields (as points in a set of relationships). Pike posited that each of these perspectives may and must come into play in a discourser's understanding of something and are not to be misunderstood as mutually exclusive. An exclusively particle view of the world may yield nothing but discreteness—unconnected, decontextualized, randomized bits of experience; an exclusively wave view may yield nothing but unstable, ever-shifting strings and combinations of experience that resist articulation; an exclusively field perspective may yield nothing but a universe of relations that govern no substantive, tangible entities that bear identifiable features of their own.

Pike's intuition that the answers to translation challenges lay both beyond the sentence in discourse and beyond discourse itself in the socio-

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and non-sequiters to be found in the increasingly more closed, monolithic systems. Let me quickly suggest some reasons why tagmemics should regain, to borrow Bruce Bauer's term, "a place at the table."

Tagmemic rhetoric, rightly assessed, emerges as unique among 20th-century rhetorical theories in its penchant for identifying universals and in its assertion that its axioms hold true for all of human behavior. It therefore is positioned to proffer insights not only into literacy and pedagogically-related issues but also into the complexities of human psychology and anthropology. For tagmemicists, rhetorical or communication models must refrain from abstracting both discourse and language users themselves from the textual, cultural, and social contexts in which they are situated; meaning is always "meaning in use." No model of language as a an autonomous system can successfully account for the meaning or significance of any particular artifact of human communication or behavior, and tagmemics stood alone for decades against Chomsky and company waiting for scholars and language planners to catch up.

Tagmemic rhetoricians informed by field-tested tagmemic theory thus continue to move beyond the narrow applications of tagmemics to prewriting and invention to apply tagmemic insights to language phenomena that illuminate the taxonomic, epistemic, and heuristic functions of language in human discourse on the way to an ever-more comprehensive theory of human behavior. At the heart of this advance is *not the nine-celled matrix,* which is but a tool or a metaphor for a tool, but Pike's conceptualization of the tagmeme, a synonym for "unit in context." The tagmeme, intended by Pike as an above-the-sentence linguistic term parallel to phoneme and morpheme, refers to any unit or "chunk" of language or language behavior that can be identified, classified, differentiated, and situated, in and by itself, in

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failed, I believe, to take advantage of tagmemics most original and potent insights into language and language behavior. Young and Becker had dynamite in their hands and mistook it for mere gunpowder, a nuclear reactor treated as a 9-volt battery. Their magnificent enterprise, a comprehensive—albeit, eclectic—theory of rhetoric designed to displace a moribund set of trial-and-error, elitest notions of composition, was cut short too soon, as they became victims of their own neologisms and were unable to establish for the profession the appropriate frame with which tagmemics might have been accessible and appropriated by those seeking a truly multicultural, and really transcultural basis for understanding language and its role in shaping human community and individual identity. Like Esau, the blessing was traded in for a mess of pottage.

Instead of its natural destiny, that of shaping and rescuing the field of rhetoric and composition from itself, the theory underwent a brief, but furious period of empirical testing of its axioms, and then descended "underground," prematurely buried, both by the indifference of its benefactors, and what might be called the politics of indifference practiced by the profession; too quickly, tagmemics was assimilated, domesticated, and placed on the library as a great idea whose time would never come. Because of these factors and others, tagmemic rhetoric has been virtually absent from the debate over the cognitive, constructionist, and empirical inquiries into the nature of language and written communication, and has never been a partner to the emerging conversations in the profession over the implications of postmodernism for composition. I would argue that this marginalization is both **consistent** with the profession's general disposition to reject out of hand wholistic paradigms for inquiry and research and **unfortunate** for those who might yet find in tagmemic theory a refreshing alternative to the extremes

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cultural frameworks in which language is used have led to new heuristic tools and a comprehensiveness of model-building that remain widely unknown and therefore unused. Within Pikean tagmemics human language use is a defining feature of human rationality, apart from which neither language nor humankind can be understood. In my view, Pike was the first among linguists and rhetoricians I know of in the 20th Century to posit reality as a multi-dimensional entity that, while existing independently of the observer, is nevertheless in some sense constructed by an individual observer through discourse—both public and private. Because, the tagmemicist believes, humankind's vision is always partial and finite, and because language itself is always approximate, never fully apprehension of the reality it seeks to name, a multiperspectival rhetorical theory and practice is necessary to catalogue and address the both the pluralism and particularism of human experience.

My concluding chart attempts to list the advantages of tagmemic theory and its potential for research, theory, and practice among compositionists and rhetoricians in the 21st Century.

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Advantages of tagmemic theory:

1. Insists on epistemological and ontological bases for the conclusions it draws.
2. Demands attention to situatedness of language and language behavior at every level of inquiry.
3. Anticipates observer bias and endeavors to articulate and incorporate it into the investigation as a factor with which to be reckoned.
4. Creates a versatile lexicon of useful terms and concepts to identify, describe, differentiate, and contextualize the nature/features of a unit under inquiry—whether it is a linguistic, rhetorical, or behavioral phenomenon.
5. Provides a set of systematic heuristic tools and a consistent notation system to explore, examine, and test the acceptability and accuracy of emerging descriptions of data and relationships within and among it.
6. Places no artificial limitation on the subject matter, its form or nature, that can be investigated under its aegis.
7. Projects dissonance and/or anomaly as clues and cues to more ultimate levels of reality rather than as negatives to be explained away or subsumed in a contrived, homogenized description.
8. Affirms universals of language and behavior that cross cultures, languages, genders.
9. Privileges persons above abstractions, community over autonomy, philosophical wholism over reductionism.
10. Accommodates multiple motivations, worldviews, research modes in its attempts to confront the complexity, uniqueness, and vitality of human personhood and communication.

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